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## ATOPIA: ON FRÉDÉRIC NEYRAT'S MANIFESTO FOR A RADICAL EXISTENTIALISM

PHILOFICTION ATOPIA, EXISTENTIALISM, NEGATION, OUTSIDE, VIRTUALITY

"Where am I?" asks the sleeper who wakes with difficulty. He doesn't recognize the room, the furniture. It is too dark; lingering parts of the dream slip into the surroundings, giving them a strangely worrying air. But are we not living the inverse situation today? Prolonged awakening, work without the limit of time, excessive light, surplus of information, electronic links, mechanized solicitations, attentional capture: This is the reality that, penetrating the virtual dimensions, transfuses them with a suddenly flattened aspect—so poor, so slow, quasi-immobile.

—Frédéric Neyrat, *Atopias*

Isn't it true? The moment we reenter the stream of light, the byways and highways of the virtual ocean, the web of links that seem to reach out from our node, our computer or mobile phone toward some distant spot on the globe we begin to feel this uncanniness, a *Deja vu* as if we'd been here before, done this all before, watched the same pages drift by, the same thoughts and words and images echoing the same drift of senseless information as if we'd never left, as if this waking dream were repeating itself over and over *ad nauseum*. It's this sense of nothing really changing, a sense that today, yesterday, and tomorrow will be the same, as if the supposed reports of events and happenings across the globe were happening elsewhere, but that the information impinging on our eyes was neither there nor here but in some strange and disquieting present where nothing really changes at all. An eternity of images plastered against the blank screen of our mind in which the accelerating speed of capital seems to be circling in a void, an immobile circuit or black box simulacrum in which timelessness and the unbounded nihil of some electronic puppet master were seducing us to sleep amid the profuse glamour of a hyperworld utopia of light without shadows. Trapped in the present, unable to move, we seem to wander in this cave of light like sequestered demons of some false order of being, our minds attuned and entrained to the political corruption of our era, the neoliberal consensus reality that there are no futures, no alternatives, only this ever-present system of collusion and crime, a catastrophic universe of doom.

As Neyrat puts it above we seem to live in a virtual flatland, a two-dimensional realm of pure noise from which we are trying to grasp and make sense of events transpiring around the world that seem unreal: dislocated and disjoined from our actual lives, our bodies. We tell ourselves that these events and traces from elsewhere expose us to the news of the world, and yet we are

bombarded by critics and watchdogs to beware of the fake news, the fake worlds being perpetrated on us, seducing us with a false world – a vacuum of ideas and thoughts immersed in a specious immanence devoid of any and all alterity. It's as if we'd entered some Twilight Zone scenario in which the world no longer exists, rather it has become a stage set for profiteers and scoundrels; and yet, there is behind the façade an algorithmic protocol rechanneling, remixing, and replaying bits and pieces of a prefabricated universe of information, packaging it for our gaze as if the order of being were a mere mathematical equation, a fictional sequence in a sit-com where the canned laughter replaces experience and the ghosts on the screen replace us as the true players of this vacuous game. In the end we discover that we are ciphers in a chess match whose rules have only one outcome: loss.

Cut off and alone we gaze at a world we believe to be real, to be happening, changing. But is it? How do we trust what is taking place upon the screen that connects us through these electronic tunnels to other computers? How do we know the virtual screen is presenting us with a real world of facts and substance? We don't. We assume too much, we trust this virtual world to give us this thing we term "truth" when in fact it supplies us only a simulacrum of truth, a nice tidy fictional semblance fabricated out of the past, a mere translated world seen through the filters of machine or mind that points to nothing outside, a purely immanent world situated in a timeless void. As Neyrat puts it,

We no longer know "where" we are, starting from the moment we seek to know it. We consult the sky, the stars, the compass; we wish we had a GPS. What is the significance of this "where"? We say that we are in a space. But what might this mean, to be in, depending on whether we are in transit (and why?), in motion (at what speed?), waiting (but for what?), or sleeping (under what sedative?). If we are inside, there must be one, two, or several outsides—but which? Are they other forms of the outside, or do they foretell other worlds, other forms of life? Who knows? But this is exactly what we must know: how to be oriented in thought itself.<sup>1</sup>

How to be "oriented in thought itself"? Isn't this our predicament today. To take our bearings, discover which direction points us to the realm of trust, truth, and thought itself? It's this inability to trust what we see, hear, or know that has thrown our world into a realm of weirdness, left us feeling eerily bound to a realm of illusion unable to decipher or interpret even the smallest event as factual. Everything has become meaningless, and we are all bound in a world of pure or completed nihilism that Nietzsche prophesied would come about. In a world of pure images we have become delirious, fragmented, bound to a Farris wheel going in circles going nowhere, living in a realm of information produced in one part of the globe which are transformed into affects on the other side of the world, all at such speed, without mediation, approaching a vertiginous instantaneity. "The sleeper or the one who awakens—we no longer really know which—asks again, even more anxiously: "where am I"?" (Neyrat, *ibid.*)

This sense of being disjoined from our physical world, of drifting in a tide of meaningless information that can no longer be trusted or connected to our everyday lives has left us feeling anxious, disconnected. As Neyrat tells us, this is the world of absolute immanence, cut off from the Outside, lost in a realm of pure image and representationalism:

Density, entanglement, fusion, epidemic communication: To define the ontological regime of such saturation in terms of its ultimate consequences, we must speak of saturated immanence. Immanence in the proper sense of the term, in *manere*: what remains in itself, always inside, without an outside, without exteriority. (Neyrat, *ibid.*)\*

This sense of floating in a dreamland of images, immersed in a world of thought without any sense of being real, of anything that can give us a sense that there is an "outside," an exteriority. This is our predicament today.

Oh, sure, we could take our mobile phones and flush them down the toilet, take a sledge hammer and doom our computers to oblivion, but where would that get us, really? Once our attachment to the void of the internet is gone, once our electronic toys are gone what then? Our connection to friends, family, associates if not exactly gone, will seem more distant from the immediacy of a click, a voice, a message, a text msg, an image, etc.. We will have to walk or ride to meet people, or use the old fashioned forms non-digital analogue tools to connect. But how has that changed anything? Want that just isolate us in a world of physical things, cut off from the supposed *outside world* of events and happenings? What is our life amid things and objects, really? Once we are cut off from this virtual world and forced to slow down and live in a disconnected realm of things and relations no longer defined by images and representations, what then? Will we really be able to function better?

Of course many Luddite advocates have been opting for this disconnection from machines and its global nexus for decades. And, of course, there are people who will go off the grid, wander up into places like Alaska's last frontier and vanish into the wilderness trying to live off the land and without electronics. One can watch shows on survivalists and such experiments, but even these fierce advocates of freedom and isolation have to return from time to time to the city for certain goods that cannot be had in those wild places. So what does that get us? The life of these isolates is extreme, their whole existence wrapped up with survival: hunting, fishing, trapping, building, in an endless cycle of hand to mouth that never ends. And if they are injured the whole experiment is over, finished; caput.

No. We cannot go back to a primitive world of hunters and gatherers. That door is closed for billions of people in a world where even the most primitive societies have already been imposed and transformed by modernity, by this global progressive economy and civilization based on immediacy, presentism, and absolute simultaneity and synchronization. We are the product of the clock-work world of work and play, children of the Enlightenment whether we will or want. Instrumentalised and shaped to technological wonders we are dependent on their co-existence, their technicity with us. We are all Prometheans – living in a world where the

gifts of the gods of technology have made us what we are, and we cannot unmake this world of technological wonders unless we would alter the shape and course of our civilization.

Of course there will always be the renegades who will fight this technoworld we've created: a hundred, a thousand, a million, or even millions could go off the grid and try to exist independent of civilization. But where would they go to leave it? Build islands in the ocean out of flotillas? There is no where to go, no place without its touch and corruption by the impact of global civilization. As Neyrat reminds us,

The globe is stifling; it has been made by swallowing all that it was not. Imperialism and colonialism have decimated all Others ("Exterminate all the brutes!"); capitalism has subsumed the economy; tele-technologies have locked down the planet at the same time the planet has revealed—thanks to Humboldt, Leopold, Lovelock, and every environmental thinker—its internal connections. A fusion of the tele-technological globe and of the ecosphere has occurred—but to the detriment of the latter, as any real political ecology must remind us. This asymmetrical fusion has placed humanity, the human form, in the position of a gigantic mechanical mouth, a "major geological force" keeping a giant eye on the disasters of the Anthropocene.

What this means is that for thousands of years humans as *humans* have so *humanized* the planet, internalized the planet as a part of the human enterprise and project that nothing is alien to us, there is nothing outside the human enterprise that remains; even the natural world of things and objects has ceased to be non-human, nature as many are telling us has disappeared; the natural in man has vanished into a primitive night of nights. What this means is everything is artificial now, we most of all. This is what saturated immanence is, this feeling of immobilization, this feeling that we have lost something, lost our way in a world that was once transcendent to our humanity. As Neyrat puts it:

Speaking of saturated immanence is not only a matter of describing extreme speed, vertiginous acceleration, or the conditions of panicked contiguity of psychic and political phenomena, but also a tendency towards the immobilization of phenomena at the horizon of their movement. Saturation describes the phase transition in which the varieties of flux that compose the global network end in a sort of inertial movement, which, without exterior perturbation, would remain the same. This seems counter-intuitive because we are told that our world is fluid, as are the subjectivities that inhabit it. However, a radical change in society would require a break with what today is the dominant form of change: *inertial change*.

Mark Fisher once spoke of "capitalist realism" as that sense of closure within inertial change, a false world in which everything changed so it could remain the same, a realm in which the very ability to think real *change* was outlawed, a world in which the very notion of an alternative to capitalism was itself banned. We no live in that world, a world accelerating nowhere, the speed of change in a present without outlet: a world so enslaved to the present that no other viewpoint is considered admissible. As François Hartog in *Regimes of Historicity: Presentism and Experiences of Time* tells us,

Today's presentism can thus be experienced as emancipation or enclosure: ever greater speed and mobility or living from hand to mouth in a stagnating present. Not to forget a further aspect of our present: that the future is perceived as a threat not a promise. The future is a time of disasters, and ones we have, moreover, brought upon ourselves. (Page xviii).

It's this sense of impending doom, of the impact of climate change and the multitude of other man-made or natural disasters ahead of us in some undefined future that has spawned a medicinal alternative, a regime of immunological enclosure and security to close off our access to this future, this wasteland and apocalypse of the Anthropocene. As Neyrat will explicate,

Saturated immanence is the result of an immunological drive that is not unique to our society but that has found a new form of expression thanks to technological development. The immunological drive is a fundamental tendency to immunize the self. ... The immunological drive uses the powers of negativity to thwart the essential function of negativity: the untethering (*déliation*) without which no expression of the living, no singularity, and no existence would be possible. As an extreme hypothesis, we might thus consider the globe, the hydroglobe of absolute flux, as the monumental result of this drive.

It is the Arch-Conservative Peter Sloterdijk who has called for a cooperative immune system at a planetary scale, "a global co-immunity structure" (451), saying a "General Immunology is the legitimate successor of metaphysics and the real theory of 'religions'. It demands that one transcend all previous distinctions between own and foreign; thus the classical distinctions of friend and foe collapse. Whoever continues along the line of previous separations between the own and the foreign produces immune losses not only for others, but also for themselves."<sup>2</sup> The point here is to treat the earth and humanity as a medical problem: "The helpless whole is transformed into a unity capable of being protected." (451) Protected from whom?

Nick Land in one of those cyberpunk forays in his *Fanged Noumena* would satirically jibe the Human Security Regime immunizing itself against future change: "The global human security allergy to cyberrevolution consolidates itself in the New World Order, or consummate macropod, inheriting all the resources of repression as concrete collective history."<sup>3</sup> It's this humanist enterprise as an immunological program within the neoliberal world order that seeks to enclose humanity within an ideological enclosure in which no change or alternative to the present state of things is possible, and it will through the power of global governance, law, media-tainment, propagandize and anathematize all oppositional thought: immunizing itself against the toxic fallout of a world in which anything but the capitalist credo and program can be envisioned or imagined.

Neyrat to sum this up tells us that this *global absolute* has "integrated all difference, as well as a local residue that remains non-

differentiated," in which there is no possibility of radical Transcendence or escape, and yet closed off in this false simulacrum and immunological hyperark of defensive economics and political malfeasance there is still the possibility ever so slight of a re-injectable transcendence into the world:

The web of contagion seeks to immunize itself, to set itself as untouchable, and the undamaged seeks to diffuse itself across the globe. If the saturated immanence of the hydroglobe describes a limit-state in which the undamaged and the contagious converge, this limit-state does not exactly cover the entirety of the situations that make up the world.

Ultimately Neyrat sees the task of philosophy today as one in which we need to analyze the immuno-political processes that have led to the formation of saturated immanence, and to desaturate it, to dis-integrate all the thinking and the modes of production that lead to the formation of the space-time of the undamaged. (ibid.)

Next, this involves bringing to light the secret complicity of the undamaged and the contagious, between which the flows of the hydroglobe circulate. Against the formations of the undamaged, it is not primarily a matter of creating continuity: the psycho-political stakes consist of re-appropriating separation. But against contagion, it is not a matter—a reactionary hypothesis—of appealing to radical Transcendence, but to the creation of relation. To oppose continuity to the undamaged and Transcendence to the contagious will only keep the machine of immuno-contagion going. (ibid.)

Then the objective is not to prolong the assessment of the dissolution of subjectivity and presence but, on the contrary, to further the possibility of presence in itself. This is why our task is not a deconstructive one. In fact, the "pure" presence that Derrida analyzed is not presence at all, as he thought, but absence, which is to say a presence purified of existence. The problem is that, in the hydroglobe, existence is literally impossible, if we understand existence as a singular metabolism of relation and separation. In company with the "new materialists," we must think anew the materiality of our presence towards-the-world—but we must insist on the fact that matter is not continuous, but broken, definitely lacerated. (ibid.)

In this sense, we must indeed carry out Nietzsche's program: the aristocracy of singularity and the fight against all absolute Transcendence. But this program must be established on the basis of a spiral-contingency. The eternal return is not that which comes back to the same, but that which breaks, each time, into a new existence. That which repeats is not a substance, or an identity, but the failure of identity, the terrible and fascinating return of the groundless. This last term must be identified as that from which existence begins: empty field, atopia, spacing, deviation, clinamen. Existence is an originary clinamen. (ibid.)

Such a program of philosophy makes way for the imagination—that essential, forgotten, hidden element of philosophy. For the imagination is as dangerous as chaos, which is its source. If there is an alternative world to propose, then, it must be specified that this other world is not the other of that which is, but the other of that which is not. We must invoke the alterity of non-being—an alterity without which metaphysical propositions are reduced to mere operating concepts. (ibid.)

Finally, this alterity of non-being should set philosophy before its truth: its task is to give an explanation of the madness of the out-of-place, by loading existential trans-jects with a meaning. It cannot and must not seek more than this activity of transferring charge, but it must assure this in order to liberate time. The philosophical liberation of time must find ways of resonating with the only resistance possible to the saturated immanence of the hydroglobe: a chronological dis-joining, a new occupation of time. (ibid.)

He will explicate the details of this task in the bulk of his new manifesto, and we will assume that his untranslated works will become available at a future date...

\*I'm reading this on Kindle but it is not giving me either page numbers or Kindle page coordinates. I want add pages or kindle, there being none I can add.

1. Neyrat, Frédéric. *Atopias: Manifesto for a Radical Existentialism*. Fordham University Press; 1 edition (October 3, 2017)
2. Sloterdijk, Peter. *You Must Change Your Life*. Polity; 1 edition (October 15, 2014)
3. Land, Nick. *Fanged Noumena: Collected Writings 1987–2007*. Urbanomic/Sequence Press; 4th edition (December 21, 2018)
4. taken from here

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